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Lifespan Analyses of Social Influence on the Sport Commitment and Participation of Masters Athletes

Project Summary

This research aimed to identify the nature of various social influences determining increased commitment to continue sport involvement among middle-aged and older sport participants. Research was conducted among samples from international-, national-, and regional-level masters sport (> 35 yrs old) events, as well as from Senior Games (55+ yrs) events. First, results showed that the influence of significant others was related to higher levels of voluntary (functional) sport commitment among masters athletes (MAs), which is important because voluntary commitment typically encourages continued participation. Some evidence showed that the influence of significant others on functional commitment depended on age status. For example, younger MAs (40 yrs old) reported more functional resolve to continue sport when perceived expectations and pressures from others declined, whereas older MAs (early 60s) increased their desire to continue sport as expectations from significant others rose. Second, results showed that both positive social influence (support) and negative social influence (expectations/pressure) were important to consider in ensuring that participants continued in sport, without feeling highly obligated to do so. For example, when international-level MAs reported increases in perceived social support over the course of a year, their feelings of obligatory commitment correspondingly decreased, which is important because high feelings of obligation do not typically foster continued involvement. Third, for subsets of MAs that reported a broad social network around them, the four most important agents for influencing sport commitment were one's spouse (or significant other), own children, training partners, and one's health professional. Masters athletes' obligatory commitment levels were predicted by perceived pressure from one's spouse and from training partners, such as the anticipated disapproval from these agents should they quit their sport. Endorsement of sport participation from one's physician, on the other hand, was associated with lower obligatory commitment. Pressure from one's children to continue in sport was a salient perception explaining both obligatory and functional commitment. Fourth, descriptive data revealed that not all MAs have a broad social network surrounding them (e.g., > 20 % report no children or spouse), and it may be possible that a different set of social agents may be influential for these athletes. Fifth, some small gender differences were observed, with males typically reporting stronger obligations to have to continue their sport involvement, with males' obligatory commitment levels being more strongly tempered by social support, and males' obligatory commitment levels being more strongly related to social pressures.

A secondary objective was to examine the influence of individual factors on sport commitment, in order to more fully understand what facilitates continued commitment, above and beyond social influences. In both longitudinal and cross-sectional samples, functional commitment was most strongly predicted by the degree to which participants reported enjoying the sport experience. Additionally, longitudinal results for international-level masters demonstrated that increased perceptions of having invested personal resources in sport predicted increased functional commitment, especially among older cohorts (> 60 yrs). When athletes increasingly anticipated having enjoyable experiences and special occasions as a result of future sport

involvement (i.e., involvement opportunities), then their voluntary commitment also rose, especially among younger masters (40 yrs). Results indicated that involvement opportunities relating to mastery of personal skills, improvement of health and fitness, travel through sport, achieving competitive goals, delaying effects of aging, and social reasons, were important. Findings were replicated for the most part in cross-sectional analyses for regional-level masters and Senior Games athletes. Gender effects indicated that females' functional commitment was more strongly predicted by personal investment.

Research Methods

Cross-sectional and longitudinal (panel design) self-report survey methods involving reliable and valid instruments relating to the Sport Commitment Model were distributed on-site or via an on-line platform to participants from masters sport events and clubs, and Senior Games events.

Research Results

Current MAs and Senior Games participants report much higher levels for functional (voluntary) commitment than they do for obligatory commitment. Thus, on the whole, they are doing sport because they want to and have freely chosen it. Still, many participants report concurrent, yet lower levels of obligatory commitment, which may be problematic because obligation does not necessarily facilitate continued involvement and may be related to drop-out.

Perceived social support was positively associated with the types of commitment that sustain sport involvement, and perceived social pressures determined the types of commitment that possibly result in drop-out or discontinuance.

Individual factors related to enjoyable experiences, prior investments in sport, and perceptions of diverse beneficial involvement opportunities unique to masters sport, each determined the types of commitment that facilitate continued sport participation. Perceptions of enjoyable experiences are particularly important at all life stages, perceptions of prior personal investments are increasingly important at older ages (> 60 yrs) and more so among females than males, and perceived involvement opportunities have the strongest effects on commitment under the age of 60.

Social support interventions should focus on the social agents that appear most influential for increasing commitment. Based on the present findings, MAs (who report a broad social network) would benefit from interventions that focus on spouse, children, training mates, and health practitioners.

Limitations of results/conclusions:

Additional analyses need to link each of the types of commitment to the frequency, intensity, and seasonal nature of MAs' involvement, and to determine the impact of across several consecutive seasons.

Results pertain to already active sport participants, thus, findings are more likely to inform interventions to retain individuals; applying findings towards the recruitment of new individuals to masters sport would require confirmation with different samples.

Policy Implications

Relevance of research to enhancing sport participation in Canada:

- Strategies to increase participation should focus on elevating functional commitment, while alleviating conditions that cause obligation. Education and sport curriculum guides for MAs, their significant others, coaches or programmers might illustrate examples of ways to facilitate conditions for functional commitment.
- Sport programming interventions might consider means to reduce pressures from, and/or encourage support and the sharing of supportive resources from spouse, children, and training mates, and find means to heighten support from health practitioners.
- Informational strategies to promote lifelong sport should enunciate the enjoyment of present participation, but also highlight the diverse involvement opportunities that have been reported by MAs. Opportunities that should be advertised as part of the masters sport 'brand' include: competitive achievement and personal challenge, skill learning and mastery, health and fitness, social motives, travel through sport, and deferral of aging effects. These involvement opportunities should inform activity programming. Without discounting its importance, our findings suggest that prior literature has possibly overestimated the opportunity for social affiliation, while failing to acknowledge the attractive opportunities that MAs see in competition and testing one's skills. The aforementioned opportunities should perhaps be celebrated as being more diverse than opportunities afforded by other alternative leisure pursuits for middle-aged and older individuals. It may also be important that these opportunities be advertised as applying to an entire community of masters participants, to counter the risk that many in society see the masters sport experience as relating only to the exceptional few (i.e., the super age-group athletes) featured in popular media. Interventions that advertise anticipated benefits unique to sport participation should be important at all life stages, though our research suggests that their effects may be greatest for participants < 60 yrs. Finally, strategies to retain active participants (especially females, and those > 60 yrs) might focus on having individuals reflect on the amount of time, energy, and effort that they have already invested in sport.

Next Steps

One research question may be to identify the individual and social conditions that attract new people to masters sport. Newcomers may be 're-engagers', people who formerly did sport in youth but then disengaged, 'transfers' from one sport to another, or 'first-timers' who are engaging in sport for the first time as an adult, and the conditions for adopting sport activity may vary among these groups.

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

Findings may inform sport programmers/organizations who seek to strategically tailor activities and resources to the personal and social motives of MAs, with the goal of building a critical mass of lifelong sport participants, in a system that sufficiently sustains participants' involvement such that they may benefit from sport over the long-term.